



Jason Boland & the Stragglers Start a Worldly Discussion

New Album *Rancho Alto* Aims to Intrigue Country Fans

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Jason Boland & the Stragglers

Jason Boland & the Stragglers started in 1998 as just another college band playing the bars and dancehalls of Oklahoma. They're not kids anymore, though, and their sixth studio album, *Rancho Alto*, finds them dipping a toe into the chilly waters of social commentary.

"[Fans] are more capable of complex thought than the country music industry thinks they are," says Boland.

He holds to this belief in spite of what he describes as a cookie-cutter approach on country radio. His new album, on the other hand, purposely hides a few nuggets of contemplation, keeping them personal to avoid sounding preachy.

Released Tuesday (Oct. 4), *Rancho Alto* touches on trusty country themes like growing up and losing love but also finds time to consider criminal justice, plutocracy, eminent domain and cultural stagnation -- if you know how to look

for it, that is.

Boland recently called in to **CMT.com** to talk about the new album, individuality in country music and the future of "songs about whittling."

We're here to talk about *Rancho Alto*. Are you guys excited?

Boland Yeah, for sure, we're happy with this one. I think we're figuring out who we are in the studio and attacking what we know we can accomplish. Every time when people ask "What's your best record?" I always try to point to the ones that we lived up to our potential. But I think we've gone through some of the struggles from the initial shock of "Hey, we record music!" to "All right, we can do these things as good as anybody because we're us."

Can you tell me what red dirt country really is and what it means to you?

It really goes back to everybody should play music. And everybody's got a song in them. And everybody has a personal experience. Then people start labeling stuff down to the geographic region ... and one form of it got caught in Texas. Well, guess what? You can't call the Great Divide Texas country -- because they're hardcore Okies. You can't call **Cross Canadian Ragweed** Texas country. So then it spawned another label. I think the true heart of it is having something different to the pop movement and loose. It was just to be very personal. What's your song? What do you have to say? That's the spirit and soul of it.

So what you're saying is that it's about individuality?

Well, let's face it. What are the big pop-sharks-in-suits after? Are they after the furtherment of the art, or are they after making some money? We feel that many of them fell prey to trying to make money. So the more that happens you're going to see: "A," what works fast ... and "B," the one that's already the easiest to do that requires less people to deal with. We could probably go on and formulate it.

But have you even been totally surprised by somebody that wrote a song? Somebody that doesn't even write songs? They just learned two chords on the guitar and they made up one song and you thought, "That's really good." I've had friends surprise me like that, and it just shows me that everybody should be writing their song and playing music.

Some readers will know Lloyd Maines as the *Dixie Chicks*' producer. What kind of guidance did he bring to your recording sessions?

It's complete and total down to emotional guidance ... he's been with us from the get-go. I'm sure it's some chronological fallacy to put one ahead of the other, but if it wasn't for Lloyd and his guidance on our band and the production of our music, I do know it would have gone way different. Even now when we went in for *Rancho Alto*, we have more musical ideas because he taught us how to look for them through songs. And it's strange to see everything a producer really does in the studio. He's the final ear. When a guy like me comes and fingerpicks through a tune about driving on a road, like "Comal County Blue," they put the "da na na naa" in between the bridge. It's little things like that. They bring out the overlooked parts.

I wanted to ask you about "False Accuser's Lament" and how that relates to "Long Black Veil," which most people know from Johnny Cash's version. Is that just an idea you had because of loving "Long Black Veil," or did it come out as you were writing the story?

It just kind of came out as I was writing the story. I love "Long Black Veil," too. I don't know the point in the writing of the song when it clicked on me, but I just thought it would be funny to make a back story out of it. It was one of those songs that I've always been a little confused by the nobility in it. It wasn't that noble of a song to me, so I thought, "Well, let's add some wickedness," which I think most of us can identify with, especially in this day of financial problems.

So the accuser was bought off with a new plow, right?

Yeah, he's just broke. And then he gets the double judgment, the double-cross by the person. Anybody who sets you up and uses you like that isn't your friend. No matter how much money they give you. And if it comes down to the double-cross, you're the one going down, not them. So the banker took his home when the crops didn't come in, and the crops went into judgment by God.

Another one with some depth is "Farmer's Luck." That's about a guy being pushed off his land?

Yeah, Greg Jacobs is an old friend, and I'm not sure when we were visiting, but I said this album has some social conscious to it, and it's folksy. And then we got on the subject that my grandpa's farm in Meeker [Oklahoma] was taken, half of it, to turn into Meeker Lake under eminent domain. Even as a little kid, I could not wrap my head around that. So my grandpa owned this land, and they just came in and said you have to sell it? "It's ours. Here's a price for it." And they turned it into -- I don't want to disparage Meeker -- but a muddy Oklahoma reservoir. Greg said, "Well, I got a song about eminent domain and my granddad." As Bob Childers would say, it was borderline cosmic.

Is there an observation about the lake you were trying to point out?

I think, in general, people are more concerned with the appearance and the short rather than substance and the long. "Oh, yeah, ain't we having a good time out here kicking dirt. Don't look around at what's going on in the world, ya'll. Just drink up and watch football." Because that's what we do in the backwoods. We usually just sit around and tailgate and shoot stuff. Which we do! That's the bad thing. Yes, yes, we do that, too! But come on! That's like saying we should be doing songs about whittling.